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ABSTRACT

Despite the educational value of the intercollegiate debating experience in itself, tournaments do not inspire an impressive degree of participation unless there is a catalyst of competition with the prospects of rewards to the better teams. Procedures conducive to the realization of this goal are featured at most debate tournaments, in the form of elimination rounds with trophies awarded at the conclusion to the winning teams and most talented speakers. Before the elimination rounds begin, however, there is a procedural double-standard in the "preliminary" rounds. Tournament directors are not consistent in procedures for conducting preliminary rounds, but use random matching, presetting, high-low matching, high-high matching, or alternate high-high and high-low power-matching. Coaches indicate, however, that the method of matching has significant bearing on which teams advance to the elimination rounds and the quality of those teams. In judging the principle types of power-matching on the criterion that teams who do well should be rewarded, the conclusion is that high-low matching procedure best meets that criterion. The rules of this procedure are outlined. (Author/RN)

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PRELIMINARY ROUND POWER-MATCHING:

A CURIOUS DOUBLE-STANDARD

by

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Newsweek magazine several years ago carried one of the few popularized descriptions of the collegiate debater. The writer was impressed by the fact that many debaters in a year's time did the research equivalent of a master's thesis. This is, of course, only one sign of debate's academic nature. Among the other educational features of intercollegiate debate are its instruction in public speaking, its fostering of clarity in exposition, and its nurturing of rapid analysis. Could these values, in and of themselves, inspire the almost incredible amount of preparation which is involved in tournament debating? Unfortunately not. For debate to maximize its educational impact a catalyst is required—the incentive provided by strong competition. Ask any college debater and he will tell you that the most enticing feature of the tournament is the prospect for reward. Most teams enter contests with the hope of at least advancing to the elimination rounds and dream of winning a debate tournament. If it were not for this recognition factor, participation would probably be considerably more limited than it already is. Despite the tremendous educational value of the debating experience, non-championship tournaments simply do not inspire an impressive degree of participation. If any principles should govern the modern debate tournament, then, the desirability of rewarding debaters for doing well ought to be one of them.

In a survey I conducted in May of this year debate coaches from across the nation were asked: "Is the desire to enable the strongest teams to advance to the elimination rounds an important consideration?" On a scale of one, very important, to seven, un-

important, the mean response was approximately two. Apparently, coaches agree that reward for high quality debating ought to be a governing feature of debate tournament administration.

Fortunately, most of the procedures conducive to the realization of this goal are already featured at most intercollegiate debate tournaments: elimination rounds are held and handsome trophies awarded to the winning teams and most talented individual speakers. Another feature is the pairing of teams in the elimination rounds according to a scheme which affords the better teams a higher probability of winning. Most debate tournaments match the number one team with the sixteenth team and so forth. This, again, rewards the better quality teams for doing well.

However, this fundamental goal is thwarted by a curious procedural double-standard which occurs before the elimination rounds commence. Where tournament directors perceive the wisdom of matching finalists on a high-low basis, they are remarkably discordant when it comes to determining which procedure ought to be employed in the preliminary rounds. Of the seventy-five coaches responding to my survey fifty-eight revealed which method of matching debate teams they will employ in the preliminary rounds of their debate tournaments this year. Of the fifty-eight tournament directors, three will preset all rounds, thirteen will randomly match all rounds, thirteen will match the best team with the lowest team in a given bracket each round (high-low matching), fourteen will match the best team against the number two team and so forth down the line each round (high-high matching), and fifteen will alternate high-high and high-low power-matching.

Most tournament directors and coaches recognize the necessity of some sort of power-matching—for without it the better teams do

not necessarily block the path of lesser quality teams into the elimination rounds, and we witness the absurd spectacle of stronger teams randomly knocking each other out of contention before the elimination rounds begin. On the grounds of fairness, desirability, conduciveness to attraction of entries, and conduciveness to better teams winning, the coaches responding to my survey rated random matching by far the worst method. When compared to any other method of matching teams random matching was so significantly undesirable (statistically speaking) that the chance of producing such results by chance alone was less than one in one thousand. Nevertheless, random matching is used as widely as any other method. In fact, last year one of the qualifying tournaments for the National Debate Tournament employed this procedure.

At best our intercollegiate debate tournament system, as far as power-matching is concerned, is a pot-luck one. Conceptually there must be one best procedure to use in matching teams, but it has not yet been agreed upon. Nevertheless, one tournament director, when called upon to explain why he selected his procedure, stated that it "seems to produce the best results." Another volunteered that "this is the way I have always done it." Still another avoided the question by noting that it is "largely a matter of personal preference." Consequently, in any given debate season a veritable plethora of power-matching systems are employed.

Disagreement as to which method of debate-pairing ought to be employed is not limited to tournament directors. In my survey I asked coaches to rate each of seven methods of power-matching: preset matching, high-high matching, high-low matching, random matching, alternate high-high and high-low matching, preset plus high-high matching, and preset plus high-low matching. With the single

exception of random matching no comparison of any two methods of matching produced a statistically significant difference. As far as the aggregate of the debate coaching community is concerned almost any method will do.

Is power-matching important? When asked the question: "In your opinion does the method of power-matching employed have significant bearing on which teams advance to the elimination rounds?" the survey responses indicated that coaches believe that there is a strong correlation. When asked: "In your opinion does the method of power-matching employed have significant bearing on the quality of the teams which advance to the elimination rounds?" coaches again indicated a strong correlation. If we value rewarding teams for doing well, then, we ought to be concerned about discovering which methods of power-matching are most able to produce that result.

Let us examine each of the principle types of power-matching in light of this criterion.

First consider high-high matching. It is often called "straight" power-matching because the number one team after any given round is paired with the number two team and straight on down the line. This feature of marginal simplicity is its only redeeming characteristic. It is by far the worst form of power-matching in that it actually punishes teams for doing well. Ironically, America's most prestigious tournament, the National Debate Tournament, has annually furnished us with rather glaring examples.

Earlier this year a team composed of two speakers who were among the top ten debaters at the N.D.T. failed to advance beyond the preliminary rounds. Despite the fact that this team earned a team point total well above that of any other team, this team ended the tournament with only four wins out of eight rounds. How did

this seemingly contradictory, but now customary, turn of events occur? The National Debate Tournament chose to employ straight high-high power-matching. Consequently, this team was so good that the level of its competition was almost astounding. In each of the first seven rounds this team met a team which would become a finalist. Only after the seventh round, when this team had been awarded its fourth loss for doing so well, did the power-matching system permit this team to be paired with a non-finalist. At the same time many lesser quality teams were busily gathering ballots which would otherwise not have been forthcoming. Another team, who, after three rounds was the top two-one team, was rewarded by being paired against a three-0 team. Next round, as the top three-one team, they met a four-0 team. Next, as the top three-two team they met a four-one team. Then, as the second best three-three team, they met a four-two team. And so they were eliminated from competition. In 1970, a team which met six finalists in eight rounds failed to break out while another team which debated only one finalist in the preliminary rounds managed to barely squeak through. In 1969, again at the N.D.T., a team from the University of Miami went four-four after meeting eight straight finalists.

Clearly, high-high power-matching is not consistent with the principle of rewarding teams for doing well. If anything it makes a team wish they had had a few more "down rounds" so that they might have been paired against the lower quality teams they should have been meeting in the first place. To further illustrate this point, take the eighth round at the typical high-high tournament. The best four-three team is matched with the second best four-three team. Conversely, the lowest rated four-three team is paired against the second lowest. Ask yourself the obvious question: if you were part

of a top quality debate team would you rather be at the top or bottom of the four-three bracket given high-high power-matching?

What are debaters to make of a tournament which gives top speaker trophies to encourage good debating while its system of power-matching encourages the opposite? How absurd it must seem to wait an hour and a half between rounds while the tournament director power-matches some of the best teams out of their rightful places in the elimination rounds. Perhaps all rounds in a tournament which matches high-high ought to be called elimination rounds. If one were to pair finalists on this basis—causing the number one and two teams to meet in octo-finals instead of finals—the outcry would be strenuous. For some mysterious reason, however, when inferior power-matching occurs in the preliminary rounds everyone is perfectly content.

What about alternating high-high with high-low matching? The only advantage of this procedure is that it cuts the number of poorly matched rounds in half. Instead of punishing the better teams every round, now they are punished only every other round. Perhaps its use persists for fear that the best teams will tiptoe through the prelims not meeting any stiff competition because the best teams will amass higher and higher cumulative point totals as the quality of their opposition sinks lower and lower. This fear is unfounded when we consider that after four or five rounds the undefeated or near undefeated teams are few and far between and thus must begin to meet each other. A somewhat less prevalent rationale for employing alternated power-matching is the feeling that "reputation" rigs the high-low matched tournament against good teams whose only flaw is that they are not yet well-known enough to receive high points. This objection, if valid, ought to be met with concern for altering

methods of judge selection, not power-matching. And if we base our method of power-matching on the presumption of unfair debate judging perhaps we ought to eliminate tournament competition instead.

Another method is to randomly match all teams with a given win-loss record. Admittedly, this is better than deliberately matching the best two teams in a given bracket against each other, but if such a match obtains one should not shift the blame from the tournament director to "lady luck" for the untimely pairing.

In short, none of these schemes is consistent with the principle which should govern all power-matching: the better teams should not be punished for doing well.

There is one method which does meet this criterion. It is called high-low power-matching. Operationally, it consists of these rules of procedure:

1. Match from the top bracket down (bracket defined as the group of all teams with a given number of wins).

2. Match high-low within brackets (pair the top team in a given bracket with the bottom team in the same bracket and so forth).

3. If the bracket contains an odd number of teams match the top team in that bracket with the bottom team in the next lower bracket.

4. If the teams matched have met, rematch the next higher low team in the bracket against the high team.

I do not contend that this method will produce perfect tournament results. I only claim that it will factor out any potential imperfections which might occur as the result of power-matching. It consumes no more time than any other form of power-matching which proceeds on a round-by-round basis. Most importantly, it is

most conducive to success for the highest quality debate teams. It rewards, not punishes good debating.

If we are to continue to encourage college students to engage in academic debate we ought to make sure that the format we provide best promotes strong competition. When we send our better, but not best, debaters to learn from elimination rounds, we ought to make sure that the teams that are still in competition are the best available. I do not contend that power-matching need be employed every round at every tournament. Obviously most tournaments, especially local ones, are constrained by the time factor. All I propose is that whenever it is employed it ought to be high-low matching. Every year I personally attend a major national tournament during the last five rounds of which fourteen hours are consumed. Last year alone, over two thousand man-hours were consumed the second day of that tournament while coaches and debaters eagerly awaited the results of the power-matching to be posted. Few of us question the expenditure of such human resources given the necessity for fairness and the five hundred dollars we have already spent getting there. All of us should question <u>both</u> expenditures if the method of power-matching employed works contrary to its purpose.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

Code

Methods

A Random matching
B Pre-set by strength
C High-high matching
D High-low matching
E Alternated matching
F Pre-set then high-high
G Pre-set then high-low

Items

1 conducive to attracting entries 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 unconducive
2 fair 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 unfair
3 desirable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 undesirable
4 conducive to best teams winning 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 unconducive

Mean scores (N=69)

	1	2	3	4	sum
A	4.7101	4.2464	4.7246	5.1739	18.8551
B	3.4928	3.8116	4.0000	3.6522	15.0000
C	3.1304	3.4348	3.8406	3.6957	14.1014
D	3.6232	3.6812	3.8986	3.3913	14.5942
E	3.2609	3.3043	3.3623	3.1884	13.1014
F	3.2029	3.3768	3.4638	3.3043	13.3478
G	3.6087	3.7681	3.7826	3.4783	14.6522

Multiple t test scores**

	G	F	E	D	C	B
A	3.715*	4.816*	5.150*	3.633*	4.361*	3.671*
B	0.340	1.594	1.885	0.380	0.920	
C	0.518	0.700	0.954	0.445		
D	0.050	1.074	1.316			
E	1.421	0.223				
F	1.166					

**comparing means in sum column above
*all statistically significant differences at the .001 level

Means of rank scores

A	4.8551
B	4.5362
C	3.7681
D	4.2754
E	3.0870
F	3.3188
G	4.1594

Questions

1. In your opinion does the method of power-matching employed have significant bearing on which teams advance to the elimination rounds?

   strong correlation 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 weak correlation

2. In your opinion does the method of power-matching employed have significant bearing on the quality of the teams which advance to the elimination rounds?

   strong correlation 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 weak correlation

3. Is the desire to enable the strongest teams to advance to the elimination rounds an important consideration?

   very important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 unimportant

4. In your opinion how often does the method of power-matching employed stand in the way of a few very strong teams advancing to the elimination rounds?

   very often 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 seldom

Mean scores of responses

1. 2.3333
2. 2.5072
3. 2.0580
4. 3.8986